

Memories of sexual abuse, trauma remain accurate into adulthood

September 28 2018, by Chrystian Tejedor And Ayleen Barbel Fattal



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Adults can accurately recall traumatic events from childhood, including instances of sexual abuse, a new article shows.

This has prompted the researchers to advocate for investigation of childhood abuse claims made by people who come forward as adults.

"Time alone should not be a bar to hearing evidence about prior sexual assault," said FIU legal psychologist Deborah Goldfarb, who is a co-author on the paper. "The evidence should be heard on its merits and arbiters of fact can then make an informed decision."

According to the study, the more traumatic the event is to the individual, the more likely a person is to accurately remember it. Also, in general, children who are older at the time of an event are more likely to accurately remember. However, there is evidence that sometimes even those who are young at the time of a sexual assault can also accurately recall parts of that event decades later. Further, researchers found that victims' memories are more accurate if they suffered from post-traumatic stress and if they received a higher level of maternal support.

Researchers from FIU and University of California, Davis made the findings after interviewing adults from two groups – people who were abused as 4- to 17-year-olds and were involved in the prosecution of their abusers, and people who were removed from their homes between the ages of 4 and 17 because of suspected maltreatment. Distinguished Professor of Psychology Gail Goodman from UC Davis was the lead author.

Although people might delay coming forward or forget some details in

cases where trials are decades after the alleged abuse took place, that is not grounds for dismissing a victim's complaint outright, researchers said. Often, there's a reason why people delay in filing a complaint.

"Delaying disclosure is quite common for individuals who have experienced sexual assault," Goldfarb said. "Studies have found a connection between the severity of the [sexual assault](#) and delaying disclosure."

Goldfarb is an attorney and assistant professor of psychology at FIU. Her research analyzes the effect of time on memory for legally relevant events. She has published several articles on [child sexual abuse](#) allegations, children's eyewitness memory and testimony and delay in disclosure of child sexual [abuse](#).

An overview of the findings, which were based on longitudinal studies of 217 participants and 30 participants, will be published in a forthcoming article in *Child Development Perspectives*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development. Funding for this research was provided by the Administration on Children and Families, National Science Foundation and National Institute of Justice.

Provided by Florida International University

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